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GETTYSBURG:  
A BATTLE ODE

GEORGE PARSONS LATHROP

*July 3, 1888*





# GETTYSBURG: A BATTLE ODE

READ BEFORE THE SOCIETY OF THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC, AT  
GETTYSBURG, ON THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE BATTLE, JULY 3, 1888

BY  
GEORGE PARSONS LATHROP



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## NOTE.

Several isolated passages from this Ode were published in *Scribner's Magazine* for July, 1888. In the following pages the poem appears for the first time as a whole, with some changes made in revision. Two strophes, originally designed to form a part of the composition, but not heretofore made public, are now inserted in the place assigned them.

The field of Gettysburg was in itself a world of battle, unrolling episodes of action and instances of bravery almost numberless. A few of the main movements only are touched upon in the following pages; not from lack of deep and fervid appreciation, but owing to the limitations always imposed by poetic form and treatment. For this reason, also, few of those constellated names appear which burn in our memories of this great deed of arms.

G. P. L.





## GETTYSBURG: A BATTLE ODE.

### I.

VICTORS, living, with laureled brow,  
And you that sleep beneath the sward!  
Your song was poured from cannon throats:  
It rang in deep-tongued bugle-notes:  
Your triumph came; you won your crown,  
The grandeur of a world's renown.

But, in our later lays,  
Full freighted with your praise,  
Fair memory harbors those whose lives, laid down  
In gallant faith and generous heat,  
Gained only sharp defeat.  
All are at peace, who once so fiercely warred:  
Brother and brother, now, we chant a common chord.

## II.

For, if we say God wills,  
Shall we then idly deny Him  
Care of each host in the fight?  
His thunder was here in the hills  
When the guns were loud in July;  
And the flash of the musketry's light  
Was sped by a ray from God's eye.  
In its good and its evil the scheme  
Was framed with omnipotent hand,  
Though the battle of men was a dream  
That they could but half understand.  
Can the purpose of God pass by him?  
Nay; it was sure, and was wrought  
Under inscrutable powers:  
Bravely the two armies fought  
And left the land, that was greater than they, still theirs  
and ours!

## III.

Lucid, pure, and calm and blameless  
Dawned on Gettysburg the day  
That should make the spot, once fameless,  
Known to nations far away.

Birds were caroling, and farmers  
    Gladdened o'er their garnered hay,  
When the clank of gathering armors  
    Broke the morning's peaceful sway;  
And the living lines of foemen  
    Drawn o'er pasture, brook, and hill,  
Formed in figures weird of omen  
    That should work with mystic will  
Measures of a direful magic—  
    Shattering, maiming—and should fill  
Glades and gorges with a tragic  
    Madness of desire to kill.  
Skirmishers flung lightly forward  
    Moved like scythemen skilled to sweep  
Westward o'er the field and nor'ward,  
    Death's first harvest there to reap.  
You would say the soft, white smoke-puffs  
    Were but languid clouds asleep,  
Here on meadows, there on oak-bluffs,  
    Fallen foam of Heaven's blue deep.  
Yet that blossom-white, outbreacking  
    Smoke wove soon a martyr's shroud.  
Reynolds fell, with soul unquaking,  
    Ardent-eyed and open-browed:

Noble men in humbler raiment  
Fell where shot their graves had plowed,  
Dying not for paltry payment :  
Proud of home, of honor proud.

## IV.

Mute Seminary there,  
Filled once with resonant hymn and prayer,  
How your meek walls and windows shuddered then !  
Though Doubleday stemmed the flood,  
McPherson's Wood and Willoughby's Run  
Saw ere the set of sun  
The light of the gospel of blood.  
And, on the morrow again,  
Loud the unholy psalm of battle  
Burst from the tortured Devil's Den,  
In cries of men and musketry rattle  
Mixed with the helpless bellow of cattle  
Torn by artillery, down in the glen ;  
While, hurtling through the branches  
Of the orchard by the road,  
Where Sickles and Birney were walled with steel,  
Shot fiery avalanches  
That shivered hope and made the sturdiest reel.



Yet peach-bloom bright as April saw  
Blushed there anew, in blood that flowed  
O'er faces white with death-dealt awe;  
And ruddy flowers of warfare grew  
Though withering winds as of the desert blew,  
Far at the right, while Ewell and Early,  
Plunging at Slocum and Wadsworth and Greene,  
Thundered in onslaught consummate and surly,  
Till trembling nightfall crept between  
And whispered of rest from the heat of the whelming  
strife.

But unto those forsaken of life  
What has the night to say?  
Silent beneath the moony sky,  
Crushed in a costly dew they lie:  
Deaf to plaint or pæan, they:—  
Freed from Earth's dull tyranny.

v.

Wordless the night-wind, funereal plumes of the tree-tops  
swaying—  
Writhing and nodding anon at the beck of the unseen  
breeze!

Yet its voice ever a murmur resumes, as of multitudes  
praying :

Liturgies lost in a moan like the mourning of far-away  
seas.

May then those spirits, set free, a celestial council obeying,  
Move in this rustling whisper here thro' the dark, shaken  
trees ? —

Souls that are voices alone to us, now, yet linger, returning  
Thrilled with a sweet reconciliation and fervid with  
speechless desire ?

Sundered in warfare, immortal they meet now with wonder  
and yearning,

Dwelling together united, a rapt, invisible choir :  
Hearken ! They wail for the living, whose passion of battle  
yet burning,

Sears and enfolds them in coils, and consumes, like a serpent  
of fire !

VI.

Men of New Hampshire, Pennsylvanians,  
Maine men, firm as the rock's rough ledge !  
Swift Mississippians, lithe Carolinians  
Bursting over the battle's edge !  
Bold Indiana men ; gallant Virginians ;

Jersey and Georgia legions clashing;—  
Pick of Connecticut; quick Vermonters;  
Louisianians, madly dashing;—  
And, swooping still to fresh encounters,  
New York myriads, whirlwind-led!—  
All your furious forces, meeting,  
Torn, entangled, and shifting place,  
Blend like wings of eagles beating  
Airy abysses, in angry embrace.  
Here in the midmost struggle combining—  
Flags immingled and weapons crossed—  
Still in union your States troop shining:  
Never a star from the lustre is lost!

VII.

Once more the sun deploys his rays:  
Third in the trilogy of battle-days  
The awful Friday comes:  
A day of dread,  
That should have moved with slow, averted head  
And muffled feet,  
Knowing what streams of pure blood shed,  
What broken hearts and wounded lives must meet  
Its pitiless tread.

At dawn, like monster mastiffs baying,  
Federal cannon, with a din affraying,  
Roused the old Stonewall brigade,  
That, eagerly and undismayed,  
Charged amain, to be repelled

After four hours' bitter fighting,  
Forth and back, with bayonets biting;  
Where in years to come, the wood —  
Flayed and bullet-riddled — stood  
A presence ghostly, grim and stark,  
With trees all withered, wasted, gray,  
The place of combat night and day  
Like marshaled skeletons to mark.

Anon, a lull: the troops are spelled.

No sound of guns or drums

Disturbs the air.

Only the insect-chorus faintly hums,

Chirping around the patient, sleepless dead  
Scattered, or fallen in heaps all wildly spread;  
Forgotten fragments left in hurried flight;

Forms that, a few hours since, were human creatures,  
Now blasted of their features;  
Or stamped with blank despair;

Or with dumb faces smiling as for gladness,  
    Though stricken by utter blight  
Of motionless, inert, and hopeless sadness.  
Fear you the naked horrors of a war?  
Then cherish peace, and take up arms no more.  
    For, if you fight, you must  
    Behold your brothers' dust  
    Unpityingly ground down  
    And mixed with blood and powder,  
To write the annals of renown  
    That make a nation prouder!

VIII.

All is quiet till one o'clock ;  
    Then the hundred and fifty guns,  
    Metal loaded with metal in tons,  
Massed by Lee, send out their shock.  
    And, with a movement magnificent,  
    Pickett, the golden-haired leader,  
Thousands and thousands flings onward, as if he sent  
    Merely a meek interceder.  
Steadily sure his division advances,  
Gay as the light on its weapons that dances.

Agonized screams of the shell  
The doom that it carries foretell :  
Rifle-balls whistle, like sea-birds singing ;  
Limbs are severed, and souls set winging :  
Yet Pickett's warriors never waver.  
Show me in all the world anything braver  
Than the bold sweep of his fearless battalions,  
Three half-miles over ground unsheltered  
Up to the cannon, where regiments weltered  
Prone in the batteries' blast that raked  
Swaths of men and, flame-tongued, drank  
Their blood with eager thirst unslaked.

Armistead, Kemper, and Pettigrew  
Rush on the Union men, rank against rank,  
Planting their battle-flags high on the crest.  
Pause not the soldiers, nor dream they of rest,  
Till they fall with their enemy's guns at the  
breast  
And the shriek in their ears of the wounded  
artillery stallions.

So Pickett charged, a man indued  
With knightly power to lead a multitude  
And bring to fame the scarred surviving few.

IX.

In vain the mighty endeavor;  
In vain the immortal valor;  
In vain the insurgent life outpoured!  
Faltered the column, spent with shot and sword;  
Its bright hope blanched with sudden pallor;  
While Hancock's trefoil bloomed in triple fame.  
He chose the field; he saved the second day;  
And, honoring here his glorious name,  
Again his phalanx held victorious sway.  
Meade's line stood firm, and volley on volley  
    roared  
"Triumphant Union, soon to be restored,  
Strong to defy all foes and fears forever!"  
The Ridge was wreathed with angry fire  
As flames rise round a martyr's stake;  
For many a hero on that pyre  
Was offered for our dear land's sake,  
What time in heaven the gray clouds flew  
To mingle with the deathless blue;  
While here, below, the blue and gray  
Melted minglingly away,  
Mirroring Heaven to make another day.

And we, who are Americans, we pray  
The splendor of strength that Gettysburg knew  
May light the long generations with glorious ray,  
And keep us undyingly true!

## x.

Dear are the dead we weep for;  
Dear are the strong hearts broken!  
Proudly their memory we keep for  
Our help and hope; a token  
Of sacred thought too deep for  
Words that leave it unspoken.  
All that we know of fairest,  
All that we have of meetest,  
Here we lay down for the rarest  
Doers whose souls rose fleetest  
And in their homes of air rest,  
Ranked with the truest and sweetest.  
Days, with fiery-hearted, bold advances;  
Nights in dim and shadowy, swift retreat;  
Rains that rush with bright, embattled lances;  
Thunder, booming round your stirless feet;—  
Winds that set the orchard with sweet fancies  
All abloom, or ripple the ripening wheat;



Moonlight, starlight, on your mute graves falling ;  
Dew, distilled as tears unbidden flow ;—  
Dust of drought in drifts and layers crawling ;  
Lulling dreams of softly whispering snow ;  
Happy birds, from leafy coverts calling ;—  
These go on, yet none of these you know :  
Hearing not our human voices  
Speaking to you all in vain,  
Nor the psalm of a land that rejoices,  
Ringling from churches and cities and foundries a mighty  
refrain !  
But the sun and the birds, and the frost, and the breezes  
that blow  
When tempests are striving and lightnings of heaven  
are spent,  
With one consent  
Make unto them  
Who died for us eternal requiem !

XI.

Lovely to look on, O South,  
No longer stately-scornful  
But beautiful still in pride,  
Our hearts go out to you as toward a bride !

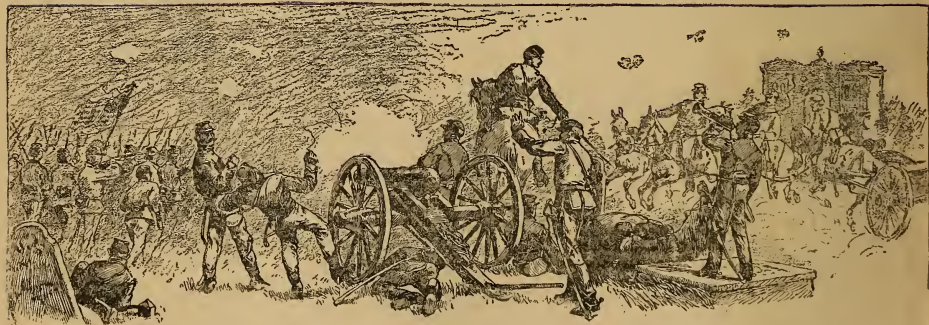
Garmented soft in white,  
Haughty, and yet how love-imbuing and tender!  
You stand before us with your gently mournful  
Memory-haunted eyes and flower-like mouth,  
Where clinging thoughts — as bees a-cluster  
Murmur through the leafy gloom,  
Musical in monotone —  
Whisper sadly. Yet a lustre  
As of glowing gold-gray light  
Shines upon the orient bloom,  
Sweet with orange-blossoms, thrown  
Round the jasmine-starred, deep night  
Crowning with dark hair your brow.  
Ruthless, once, we came to slay,  
And you met us then with hate.  
Rough was the wooing of war: we won you,  
Won you at last, though late!  
Dear South, to-day,  
As our country's altar made us  
One forever, so we vow  
Unto yours our love to render:  
Strength with strength we here endow,

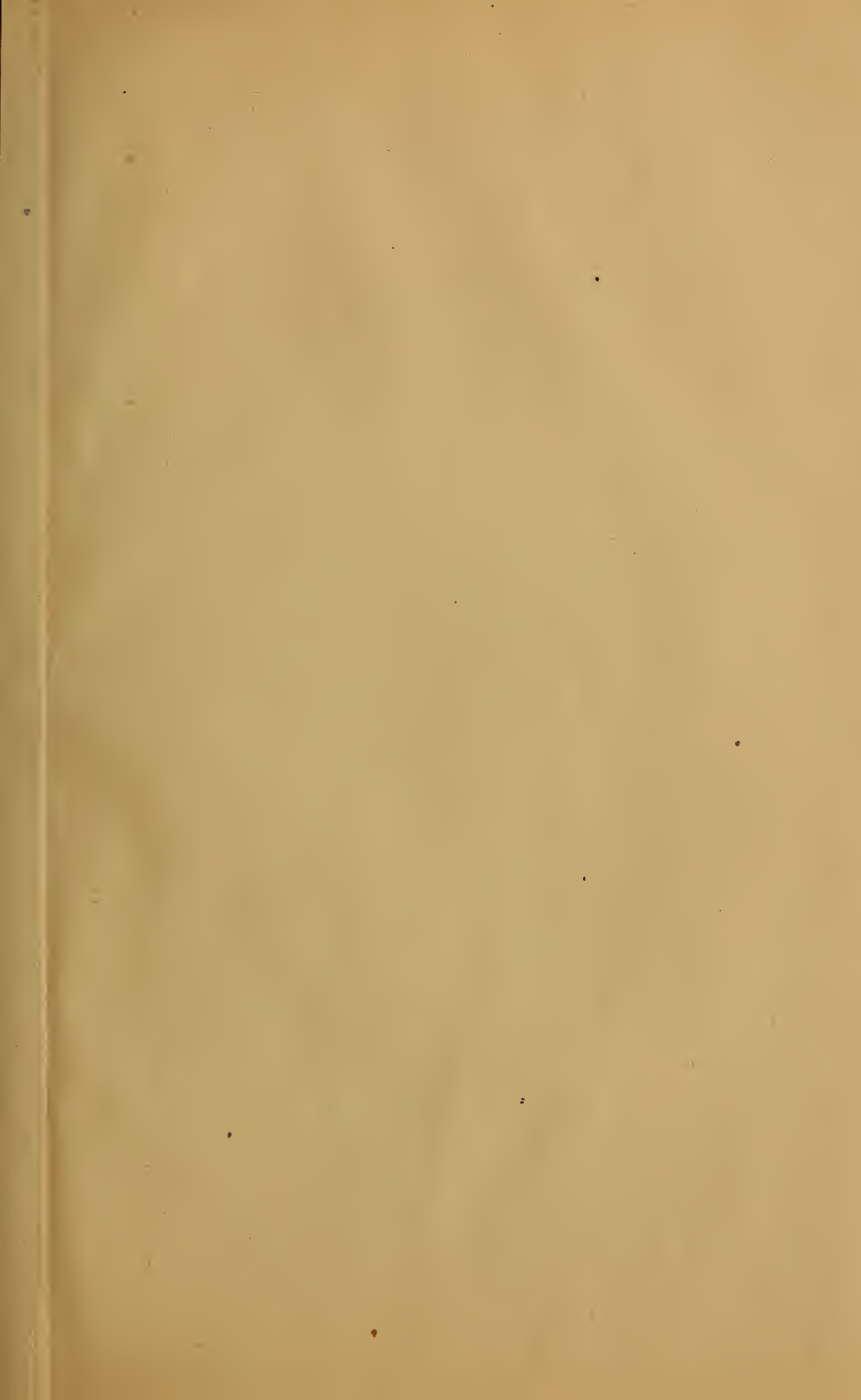
And we make your honor ours.  
Happiness and hope shall sun you !  
All the wiles that half betrayed us  
Vanish from us like spent showers !

XII.

Two hostile bullets in mid-air  
Together shocked,  
And swift were locked  
Forever in a firm embrace.  
Then let us men have so much grace  
To take the bullets' place,  
And learn that we are held  
By laws that weld  
Our hearts together !  
As once we battled hand to hand,  
So hand in hand to-day we stand,  
Sworn to each other,  
Brother and brother,  
In storm and mist, or calm, translucent weather :  
And Gettysburg's guns, with their death-giving roar,  
Echoed from ocean to ocean, shall pour

Quickening life to the nation's core ;  
Filling our minds again  
With the spirit of those who wrought in the Field of the  
Flower of Men !





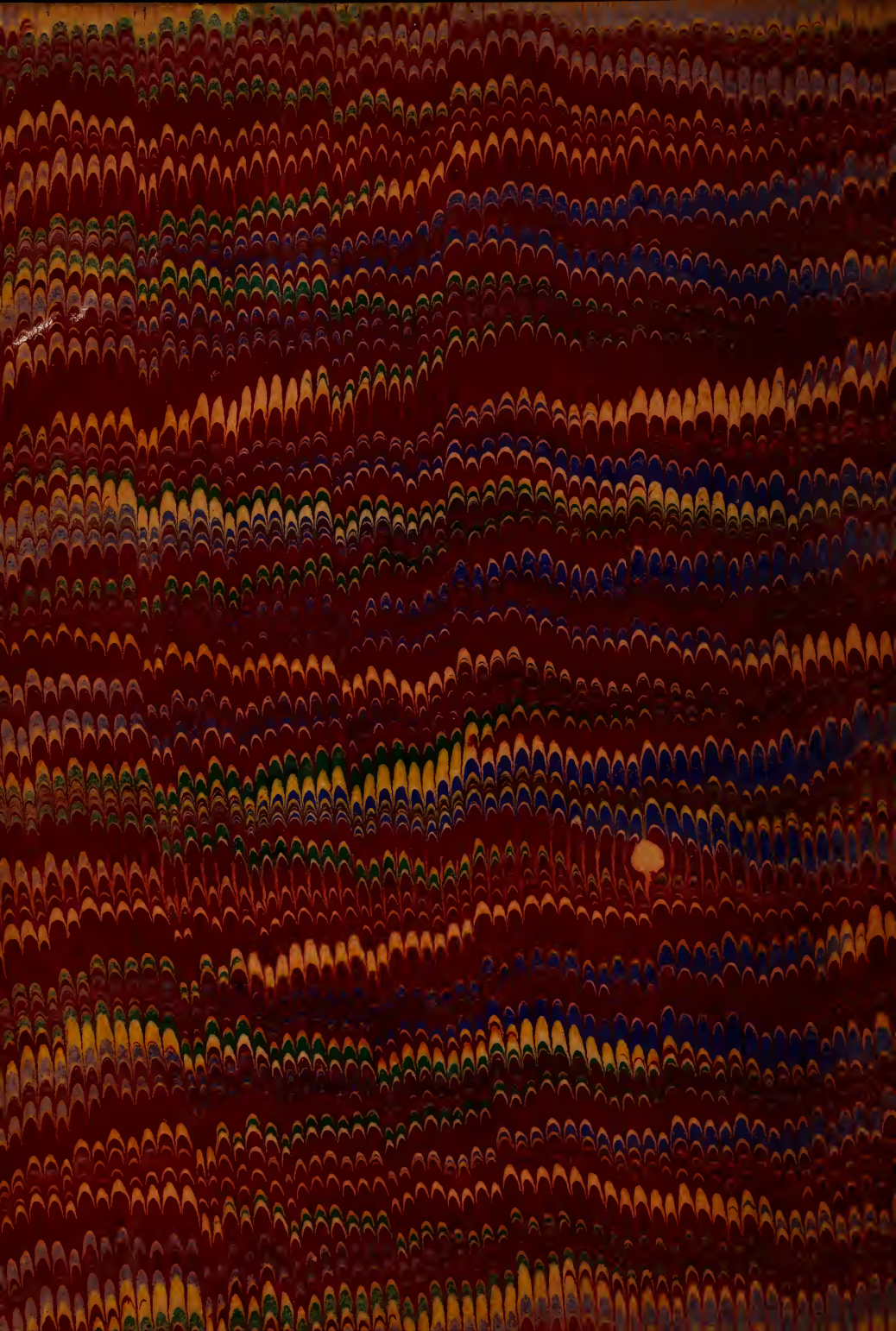


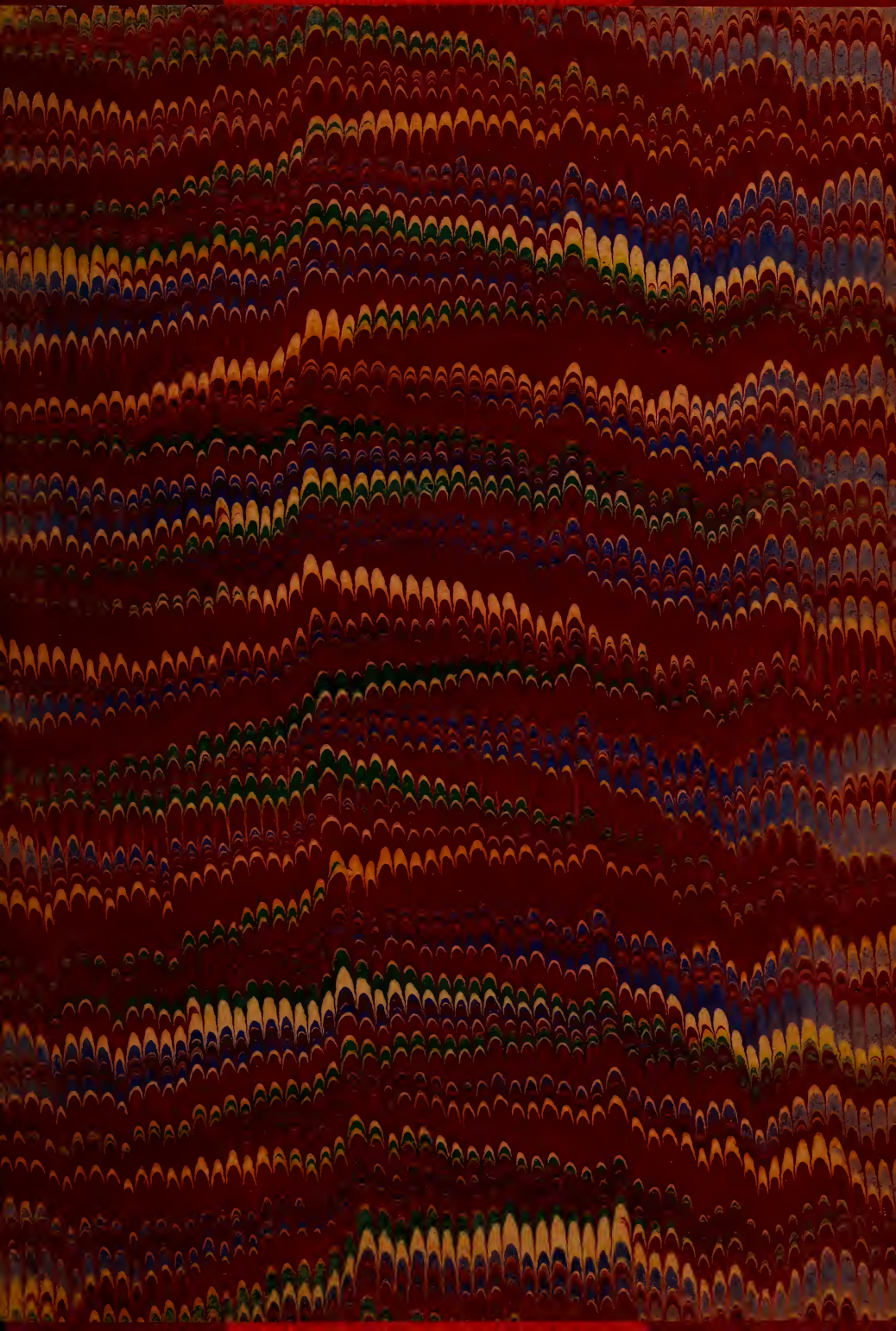














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